



# Monte Albán

## UNESCO World Heritage Site

| Historic Centre of Oaxaca and Archaeological Site of Monte Albán  |                                 |
|---|---------------------------------|
| Name as inscribed on the World Heritage List <sup>[1]</sup>   |                                 |
|   |                                 |
| Country   | Mexico                          |
| Type  | Cultural                        |
| Criteria  | i, ii, iii, iv                  |
| Reference   | 415 <sup>[2]</sup>              |
| UNESCO region <sup>[3]</sup>  | Latin America and the Caribbean |
| Inscription history   |                                 |
| Inscription   | 1987 (11th Session)             |
|  <div>Location of Monte Albán in Mexico.</div> |                                 |

**Monte Albán** is a large pre-Columbian archaeological site in the Santa Cruz Xoxocotlán Municipality in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca (17.043° N, 96.767°W). The site is located on a low mountainous range rising above the plain in the central section of the Valley of Oaxaca where the latter's northern ETLA, eastern Tlacolula, and southern Zimatlán & Ocotlán (or Valle Grande) branches meet. The present-day state capital Oaxaca City is located approximately 9 km (6 mi) east of Monte Albán.

The partially excavated civic-ceremonial center of the Monte Albán site is situated atop an artificially-leveled ridge, which with an elevation of about 1,940 m (6,400 ft) above mean sea level rises some 400 m (1,300 ft) from the valley floor, in an easily defensible location. In addition to the aforementioned monumental core, the site is characterized by several hundred artificial terraces, and a dozen clusters of mounded architecture covering the entire ridgeline and surrounding flanks (Blanton 1978). The archaeological ruins on the nearby Atzompa and El Gallo hills to the north are traditionally considered to be an integral part of the ancient city as well.

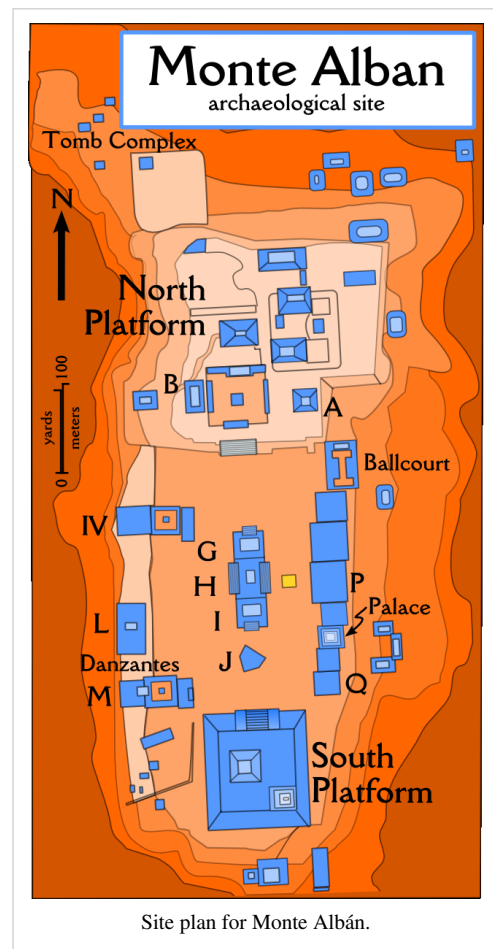
Besides being one of the earliest cities of Mesoamerica, Monte Albán's importance stems also from its role as the pre-eminent Zapotec socio-political and economic center for close to a thousand years. Founded toward the end of the Middle Formative period at around 500 BC, by the Terminal Formative (ca. 100 BC-AD 200) Monte Albán had become the capital of a large-scale expansionist polity that dominated much of the Oaxacan highlands and interacted with other Mesoamerican regional states such as Teotihuacan to the north (Paddock 1983; Marcus 1983). The city had lost its political pre-eminence by the end of the Late Classic (ca. AD 500-750) and soon thereafter was largely abandoned. Small-scale reoccupation, opportunistic reutilization of earlier structures and tombs, and ritual visitations marked the archaeological history of the site into the Colonial period.

The etymology of the site's present-day name is unclear, and tentative suggestions regarding its origin range from a presumed corruption of a native Zapotec name such as "Danibaán" (Sacred Hill) to a colonial-era reference to a Spanish soldier by the name Montalbán or to the Alban Hills of Italy. The ancient Zapotec name of the city is not known, as abandonment occurred centuries before the writing of the earliest available ethnohistorical sources.

## Research history

Being visible from anywhere in the central part of the Valley of Oaxaca, the impressive ruins of Monte Albán attracted visitors and explorers throughout the colonial and modern eras. Among others, Guillermo Dupaix investigated the site in the early 19th century, J. M. García published a description of the site in 1859, and A. F. Bandelier visited and published further descriptions in the 1890s. A first intensive archaeological exploration of the site was conducted in 1902 by Leopoldo Batres, then General Inspector of Monuments for the Mexican government under Porfirio Díaz (Batres 1902). It was however only in 1931 that large-scale scientific excavations were undertaken under the direction of Mexican archaeologist Alfonso Caso. Over the following eighteen years Caso and his colleagues Ignacio Bernal and Jorge Acosta excavated large sections within the monumental core of the site, and much of what is visible today in areas open to the public was reconstructed at that time. Besides resulting in the excavation of a large number of residential and civic-ceremonial structures and hundreds of tombs and burials, one lasting achievement of the project by Caso and his colleagues was the establishment of a ceramic chronology (phases Monte Albán I through V) for the period between the site's founding in ca. 500 BC to end of the Postclassic period in AD 1521.

The investigation of the periods preceding Monte Albán's founding was a major focus of the Prehistory and Human Ecology Project started by Kent Flannery of the University of Michigan in the late 1960s. Over the following two decades this project documented the development of socio-political complexity in the valley from the earliest Archaic period (ca. 8000-2000 BC) to the Rosario phase (700-500 BC) immediately preceding Monte Albán, thus setting the stage for an understanding of the latter's founding and developmental trajectory. In this context, among the major accomplishments of Flannery's work in Oaxaca are his extensive excavations at the important formative center of San José Mogote in the Etla branch of the valley, a project co-directed with Joyce Marcus of the University of Michigan (Flannery and Marcus 1983; Marcus and Flannery 1996).



A further important step in the understanding of the history of occupation of the Monte Albán site was reached with the Prehistoric Settlement Patterns in the Valley of Oaxaca Project begun by Richard Blanton and several colleagues in the early 1970s. It is only with their intensive survey and mapping of the entire site that the real extension and size of Monte Albán beyond the limited area explored by Caso became known (Blanton 1978). Subsequent seasons of the same project under the direction of Blanton, Gary Feinman, Steve Kowalewski, Linda Nicholas, and others extended the survey coverage to practically the entire valley, producing an invaluable amount of data on the region's changing settlement patterns from the earliest times to the arrival of the Spanish in AD 1521 (Blanton et al. 1982; Kowalewski et al. 1989).



## Site history

As indicated by Blanton's survey of the site, the Monte Albán hills appear to have been uninhabited prior to 500 BC (the end of the Rosario ceramic phase). At that time, San José Mogote was the major population center in the valley and head of a chiefdom that likely controlled much of the northern Etlá branch (Marcus and Flannery 1996). Perhaps as many as three or four other smaller chiefly centers controlled other sub-regions of the valley, including Tilcajete in the southern Valle Grande branch and Yegüih in the Tlacolula arm to the east. Competition and warfare seem to have characterized the Rosario phase, and the

regional survey data suggests the existence of an unoccupied buffer zone between the San José Mogote chiefdom and those to the south and east (Marcus and Flannery 1996). It is within this no-man's land that at the end of the Rosario period Monte Albán was founded, quickly reaching a population estimate of around 5,200 by the end of the following Monte Albán Ia phase (ca.300 BC). This remarkable population increase was accompanied by an equally rapid decline at San José Mogote and neighbouring satellite sites, making it likely that its chiefly elites were directly involved in the founding of the future Zapotec capital. This rapid shift in population and settlement, from dispersed localized settlements to a central urban site in a previously unsettled area, has been referred to as the "Monte Alban Synoikism" by Marcus and Flannery (1996:140-146) in reference to similar recorded instances in the Mediterranean area in antiquity. Although it was previously thought (Blanton 1978) that a similar process of large-scale abandonment, and thus participation in the founding of Monte Albán, occurred at other major chiefly centers such as Yegüih and Tilcajete, at least in the latter's case this now appears to be unlikely. A recent project directed by Charles Spencer and Elsa Redmond of the American Museum of Natural History in New York has shown that rather than being abandoned the site actually grew significantly in population during the periods Monte Albán Early I and Late I (ca. 500-300 BC and 300-100 BC, respectively) and might have actively opposed incorporation into the increasingly powerful Monte Albán state (Spencer and Redmond 2001).

By the beginning of the Terminal Formative (Monte Albán II phase, ca. 100 BC-AD 200) Monte Albán had an estimated population of 17,200 (Marcus and Flannery 1996:139), making it one of the largest Mesoamerican cities at the time. The city has excellent views all the way around. As its political power grew, Monte Albán expanded militarily, through cooption, and via outright colonization into several areas outside the Valley of Oaxaca, including the Cañada de Cuicatlán to the north and the southern Ejutla and Sola de Vega valleys (Balkansky 2002; Spencer 1982; Redmond 1983;



Aerial view of Monte Albán

Feinman and Nicholas 1990). During this period and into the subsequent Early Classic (Monte Albán IIIA phase, ca. AD 200-500) Monte Albán was the capital of a major regional polity that exerted a dominating influence over the Valley of Oaxaca and across much of the Oaxacan highlands. As mentioned earlier, evidence at Monte Albán is suggestive of high-level contacts between the site's elites and those at the powerful central Mexican city of Teotihuacan, where archaeologists have identified a neighbourhood inhabited by ethnic Zapotecs from the valley of Oaxaca (Paddock 1983). By the Late Classic (Monte Albán IIIB/IV, ca. AD 500-1000) the site's influence outside and inside the valley declined, and elites at several other centers, once part of the Monte Albán state, began to assert their autonomy, including sites such as Cuilapan and Zaachila in the Valle Grande and Lambityeco, Mitla, and El Palmillo in the eastern Tlacolula arm. The latter is the focus of an ongoing project by Gary Feinman and Linda Nicholas of Chicago's Field Museum (Feinman and Nicholas 2002). By the end of the same period (ca. AD 900-1000) the ancient capital was largely abandoned, and the once powerful Monte Albán state was replaced by dozens of competing smaller polities, a situation that lasted up to the Spanish conquest.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Monuments



View of Main Plaza from the North Platform. The South Platform can be seen in the distance.

The monumental center of Monte Albán is the Main Plaza, which measures approximately 300 meters by 200 meters. The site's main civic-ceremonial and elite-residential structures are located around it or in its immediate vicinity, and most of these have been explored and restored by Alfonso Caso and his colleagues. To the north and south the Main Plaza is delimited by large platforms accessible from the plaza via monumental staircases. On its eastern and western sides the plaza is similarly bounded by a number of smaller platform mounds on which stood temples and

elite residences, as well as one of two ballcourts known to have existed at the site. A north-south spine of mounds occupies the center of the plaza and similarly served as platforms for ceremonial structures.



One characteristic of Monte Albán is the large number of carved stone monuments one encounters throughout the plaza. The earliest examples are the so-called "Danzantes" (literally, dancers), found mostly in the vicinity of Building L and which represent naked men in contorted and twisted poses, some of them genitally mutilated. The figures are said to represent sacrificial victims, which explains the morbid characteristics of the figures. The Danzantes feature physical traits characteristic of Olmec culture.

<sup>[5]</sup> The 19th century notion that they depict dancers is now largely discredited, and these monuments, dating to the earliest period of occupation at the site (Monte Albán I), are now seen to clearly represent tortured, sacrificed war prisoners, some identified by name, and may depict leaders of competing centers and villages captured by Monte Albán (Marcus and Flannery 1996; Blanton et al. 1996). Over 300 "Danzantes" stones have been recorded to date, and some of the better preserved ones can be viewed at the site's museum. There is some indication that the Zapotecs had writing and calendrical notation.



The impressive stairs leading up to the South Platform.

A different type of carved stones is found on the nearby Building J in the center of the Main Plaza, a building characterized by an unusual arrow-like shape and an orientation that differs from most other structures at the site. Inserted within the building walls are over 40 large carved slabs dating to Monte Albán II and depicting place-names, occasionally accompanied by additional writing and in many cases characterized by upside-down heads. Alfonso Caso was the first to identify these stones as "conquest slabs", likely listing places the Monte Albán elites claimed to have conquered and/or controlled. Some of the places listed on Building J slabs have been tentatively identified, and in one case (the Cañada de Cuicatlán region in northern Oaxaca) Zapotec conquest has been confirmed through archaeological survey and excavations (Redmond 1983; Spencer 1982).

The site of Monte Alban contains several pieces of evidence through the architecture of the site to suggest that there was social stratification within the settlement. Walls that were as large as nine meters tall and twenty meters wide were built around the settlement and would have been used not only to create a boundary between Monte Alban and neighboring settlements but also prove the power of the elites within the community. In Scott Hutson's analysis of the relationships between the commoners and the elites in Monte Alban he notes that the monumental mounds that were found in the site seemed to be evenly spaced throughout the site so that each house would be close enough to a mound that it could easily be kept under surveillance. Hutson also makes note that over time the style of houses seem to have changed to become more private to those living in the buildings making it harder for information to be obtained by outsiders. These changes to the ability of the elites to gain information about the private lives of its citizens would have played a key role in the internal political structure of the settlement.<sup>[6]</sup>

Many of the artifacts excavated at Monte Albán in over a century of archaeological exploration can be seen at the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City and at the Museo Regional de Oaxaca in the ex-convento de Santo Domingo de Guzmán in Oaxaca City. The latter museum houses, among others, many of the objects discovered in 1932 by Alfonso Caso in Monte Albán's Tomb 7, a Classic period Zapotec tomb that was opportunistically reused in Postclassic times for the burial of Mixtec elite individuals. Their burial was accompanied by some of the most spectacular burial offerings of any site in the Americas (Caso 1932).

The site is a popular tourist destination for visitors to Oaxaca and has a small site museum mostly displaying original carved stones from the site. Trails at the site are also used by joggers, hikers, and birders.



Panorama of Monte Albán from the South Platform.

## Threats

The primary threat to this archaeological site is urban growth that is encroaching and "threatening to expand into territories that have potential archaeological value."<sup>[7]</sup> To complicate matters, the administration of the site is divided amongst four different municipalities, making a unified effort to stop the urban encroachment challenging.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Gallery



Altar



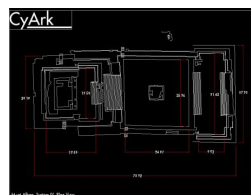
Unrestored section of Monte Albán with Oaxaca City in the background



View of Main Plaza from the South Platform, with Building J in the foreground.



One of the stelae known as *Dancing* by unorthodox positions of the characters represented.



Plan of Monte Alban's System IV structure, cut from a 3D laser scan image.

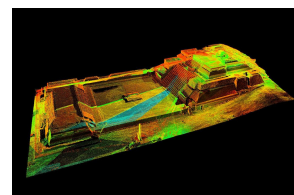


Image of Monte Alban's System IV structure, taken from a 3D laser scan image.



View across Main Plaza from the South Platform, with Building J in the foreground.



Building M as seen from the South Platform.



Stones of the Dancers, in the Plaza of the Dancers, next to Building L.



Tomb north of the North Platform



Building X on North Platform



Unexcavated building on North Platform

## Notes

- [1] <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list>
- [2] <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>
- [3] [http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/?search=&search\\_by\\_country=&type=&media=&region=&order=region](http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/?search=&search_by_country=&type=&media=&region=&order=region)
- [4] Blanton, *et al.* (1999)
- [5] MexOnline, 2012
- [6] Hutson, Scott (2002). "Built Space and Bad Subjects" (<http://jsa.sagepub.com/content/2/1/53.full.pdf+html>). *Journal of Social Archaeology* 2 (1): 53-80. doi:10.1177/1469605302002001597. . Retrieved November 15, 2012.
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## External links

- Minnesota State University website ([http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/archaeology/sites/meso\\_america/montealban.html](http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/archaeology/sites/meso_america/montealban.html))
- Virtual Monte Albán (<http://www.cnca.gob.mx/cnca/inah/zonarq/montealb.html>) INAH site with VR imagery of the site (Spanish)
- Monte Albán Digital Media Archive (<http://archive.cyark.org/monte-albn-intro>) (creative commons-licensed photos, laser scans, panoramas), particularly focusing on System IV but with images from all over the site, with data from a INAH/CyArk research partnership
- Mexican and Central American Archaeological Projects ([http://anthro.amnh.org/anthropology/research/archaeo\\_wiki.htm](http://anthro.amnh.org/anthropology/research/archaeo_wiki.htm)) - Electronic articles published by the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History.
- Metropolitan Museum of Art (NY) website ([http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/alban/hd\\_alban.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/alban/hd_alban.htm))
- Commercial website with site plans and photos of *Los Danzantes* (<http://www.celerina.com/Montealban.html>)
- The DeLanges visit Monte Alban, with lots of photos (<http://www.delange.org/MonteAlban/MonteAlban.htm>)
- Monte Alban - Sacred Destinations article (<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/mexico/oaxaca-monte-alban.htm>)
- View on Google Maps (<http://homepage.ntlworld.com/keir.clarke/alban.htm>)- With a short panoramic video of the site.
- Field Museum of Natural History Ancient Americas web site ([http://www.fieldmuseum.org/ancientamericas/rulers\\_9.asp](http://www.fieldmuseum.org/ancientamericas/rulers_9.asp))
- (<http://www.photoblog.com/dcfroburg/2009/04/23/pirmides-de-monte-albn.html>) More photos of the Monte Albán area



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